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ABSTRACT

Those who wish to learn about the experience of women studying rhetoric and composition at American colleges 100 years ago can draw upon two sorts of histories. The story of women's entry into higher education is told by such historians as Mabel Newcomer and Barbara Solomon, but such historians seldom focus on composition studies specifically. Indeed until recently, composition histories have had little to say about women. But now historians such as JoAnn Campbell are starting to uncover the story of women in the writing fields. Young women coming to the universities in the 1890s would have had to face a rough and tumble affair of warfare between the classes and countless rivalries and practical jokes, from which they were systematically excluded. After the turn of the century, however, women began to take matters into their own hands; they attempted to overcome their isolation and fashion a more hospitable environment by initiating several women's organizations separate from men's. Their lot was also difficult in the area of composition studies. Student comments during those years at Radcliffe reveal a clash between the learning styles of men and of women. Vainly, the young women hoped for some personal connection with the required writing; their professors; and the distant, authoritarian teaching style of the "section men." Many instructors seemed to respond to their students' writing in terms of precision and correctness. (Contains 23 notes.) (TB)

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Nora Bacon
Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition
July, 1994

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Women's Experience Studying Rhetoric and Composition, 1890-1910

Those who wish to learn about the experience of women studying rhetoric and composition at American colleges a hundred years ago can draw upon two sorts of histories. The story of women's entry into higher education is told by such historians as Mabel Newcomer and Barbara Solomon;[1] they document the experience of the pioneers, young women entering fledgling women's colleges or the new coeducational institutions, challenging conventional ideas about women's interests and intelligence to create the role of "collegiate woman" from scratch. The story of rhetoric instruction at the turn of the century appears in histories of our field, the work of scholars like Albert Kitzhaber, Robert Connors, and James Berlin[2] who trace the decline of rhetoric and the emergence of rigid, narrowly conceived composition courses in the last years of the nineteenth century.

But the women's histories seldom focus on composition, and the composition histories have had little to say about women. When JoAnn Campbell began her research on Radcliffe students enrolled in English A, she was breaking new ground. In the past two years, other composition specialists have followed her lead, producing such studies as Karyn Hollis's discussion of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers and Susan Kates's current work on young women at Smith.[3] It is this company I wish to join by having a look at the experience of women students at the University of California.

Let me ask you, then, to imagine a young woman coming to the University of California in 1890, a member of its twenty-first entering class. She was an unusual woman; in that year, only 2.2% of American women between the ages of 18 and 21 were enrolled in college.[4] At the University of California, fewer than 100 students entered as freshmen in 1890, about 30 of them women. The students came from a variety of backgrounds--they were the sons and daughters of industrialists, merchants, farmers,

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miners, doctors, teachers, office clerks--and they came for a variety of reasons. For women, the motivation was often vocational. As the number of public schools mushroomed in the second half of the nineteenth century, the demand for women teachers--who could be hired at a fraction of the salaries commanded by men--was growing. Other women were propelled toward the University by the sheer love of learning; others came seeking adventure, or independence, or a suitable husband. Let us imagine a young woman like so many of the students we know today, drawn to the University by all of these purposes together.

Her first task would be to pass entrance examinations in the subjects required for her chosen course of study. In the College of Letters, three courses of instruction were available: the classical course, which required exams in Latin and Greek; the literary course, requiring exams in Latin and one modern language; and the course in letters and political science. All students in the College of Letters were required to pass an English and an Advanced English exam; those in the colleges of agriculture, mechanics, mining, engineering, and chemistry took just the first English exam, called Subject 1.[5]

The language of the Subject 1 exam appears to be modelled on the Harvard entrance exam. It reads as follows:

> English 1. A short composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and grammar, upon a subject announced at the time of the exam and taken, until 1891, from the following works: Tom Brown's *School Days at Rugby*; Scott's *Lady of the Lake*; Irving's *Alhambra*; Thackeray's *Newcomes*; Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*.
>
> Applicants will also be required to analyze sentences from these works, and to pass an examination on the first seventy-one lessons in Kellogg's *Text-book on Rhetoric*.[6]

The University helped students prepare for these examinations by keeping secondary school teachers informed of the required texts and by distributing a circular with

sample questions from previous years. A sample question in the 1889 circular illustrates the kind of material tested in Subject 14, or Advanced English. It prints a passage from Tennyson, then asks:

> 1. (a) Who wrote the above passage? In what poem? Precisely what (using your words) does he mean to say?
>
> (b) Point out and explain the allusions and the rhetorical figures in the passage.
>
> (c) Why should the left-hand margin vary; or, varying, why does it not vary regularly?
>
> 2. A test in Oral Reading. The time and method will be announced by the examiner.[7]

Much might be said about these examinations and what they imply about the expectations for a secondary school curriculum--particularly noteworthy is the integration of grammar, rhetoric, and literature, and of speech and writing. Perhaps what students were most likely to observe is that the tests are very difficult.

Having passed her examinations and signed up for classes--a typical schedule might include English composition, German, philosophy, and algebra--our young woman would face the questions that seem most pressing to first-year students: where to live, how to make friends, how to find her place in the life of the university.

Here, her gender would become an important issue. Student culture at the University of California was a rough-and-tumble affair, dominated by warfare between classes, with the freshman and junior classes allying themselves against the sophomores and seniors.[8] Sophomores often met first-year men as they arrived on campus and subjected them to elaborate practical jokes--offering bogus directions to the registrar's office, for example, or measuring the younger men for "uniforms." The first big event of the year was the freshman/sophomore rush, when freshmen carrying lengths of rope came to the field at dusk and waited nervously until the sophomores rushed out from behind one of the campus buildings to engage them in battle. Members of one class sought to isolate

members of the other, wrestle them to the ground, hog-tie them with the rope, and place them under guard. Eventually, every member of the defeated class was tied up, the battle was over, the victory celebrated. Those who had fought long and well earned status that lasted throughout the year.

Of course no women participated in the rush. A 1901 novel called *For the Blue and Gold: A Tale of Life at the University of California* describes the battle with relish and adds, "On the edge hovers timidly many a throbbing co-ed, hoping and fearing for class or friend."[9] Student culture also placed a high value on football, from which women were similarly excluded. In 1890, women at the University of California had no dormitories and no gymnasium, were not represented in student government, and were not included on the staffs of student publications.[10] *For the Blue and Gold* ends with a conversation between the protagonist and his love interest, a graduating senior who has just won the University Medal for her scholarship. He gallantly says that he could not do better in his college career than to copy her.

> "No, don't do it," [she replies]. . . "I made a big mistake in shutting myself up too much in my room. I know that everybody has thought me an owl-like dig. You have done better. You haven't neglected your work, and at the same time have entered heartily into the life outside the recitation-room. I advise you to keep that up. Combine the two in an even balance and you won't feel as tired as I do on your Commencement Day."
>
> "But you women haven't the chance for outside activity that men have. You can't go in for rushes and Bourdons, nor play football, nor go out much at night."
>
> "No, we can't. But there are many things we could do to make life more cheerful for one another if we'd be to one another like men are. Women make it so hard for their sex. Don't you think I craved something more than just to dig, dig? What was there for me to do with my own living to earn, and no nice clothes, but just crawl into my shell?"

The conversation ends when she throws herself onto a chair, buries her head in her arms, and sobs "as James had never heard a woman cry before."[11]

After the turn of the century, women took matters into their own hands; they attempted to overcome their isolation and fashion a more hospitable environment by initiating several women's organizations separate from the men's. When, in 1900, campus women witnessed the creation of the Golden Bear Society--an honor society for men--they created an honor society of their own, the Prytaneans. They invited leaders among campus women--the presidents of sororities, the YWCA, and the choral society--to join, and from that time forward a deliberate and energetic effort was made to coordinate women's activities.[12] In 1906 the University hired Lucy Sprague as Dean of Women, and she, together with physician Mary Ritter and philanthropist Phoebe Apperson Hearst, supported women's efforts.

For the moment, however, we should return to the 1890s for a look at the English curriculum and a consideration of women's experience there.

It is convenient to follow Albert Kitzhaber and Donald Stewart in describing rhetoric instruction at the turn of the century in terms of two models, the Harvard model and the Michigan model.[13] At Harvard, serious attention to rhetoric was squeezed out of the curriculum; the analysis of texts was limited to the study of literary texts while student writing was dissociated from any meaningful social context and evaluated for its mechanical correctness. At Michigan, by contrast, the Rhetoric Department under the leadership of Fred Newton Scott operated with a comprehensive conception of "rhetoric," one that invited consideration of how a text worked its effect upon a reader whether the text in question had been created by a poet, a novelist, a journalist, a politician, or a freshman essayist.

The Harvard model is widely criticized by composition historians today, but the indictment is nowhere so biting as in the writing of Radcliffe students whose letters and essays were unearthed by JoAnn Campbell. In her 1992 article in *College Composition*

and Communication, Campbell quotes Radcliffe students who tell of the disillusionment they felt when their essays were subjected to ruthless criticism and judged with more attention to correctness than to content. One student, Mary Lee, wrote that English A offered

> no inspiration to write, nothing to stimulate what few ideas we may possess, no encouragement held out, no attempt to let us develop along our own line, our best efforts scorned, and torn apart, pulled to pieces, and nothing given up in its place, this is English A, a bore, a drudgery, a discouragement.
>
> In English A we sink our individuality in a sea of criticism. . . Whatever idea, whatever individuality of style we may naturally possess, we must drop under the red pencil of the section man. . . [14]

Campbell suggests that the pain and resentment evident in Mary Lee's words--and in those of other Radcliffe students with similar complaints--reveal a clash between the learning style of the women, who hoped for some personal connection with their instructors, and the distant, authoritarian teaching style of the "section men." Surely the young men in the Harvard sections also would have preferred a response less petty and more humane.

It appears that the freshman composition course at California bore some resemblance to Harvard's English A. From 1883 until the end of the century, the course required readings and recitations from William Minto's *Manual of English Prose Literature: Biographical and Critical, Designed Mainly to Show Characteristics of Style*. The course was known to students and faculty as the Minto course, and was roundly disliked. *For the Blue and the Gold* explains that "most of the new freshmen held the Minto course for a bore, because there was too much digging attached to it."[15]

The man who did most to shape the Minto course was Cornelius Beach Bradley, a former high school principal who came to the university in 1882. Berkeley's Professor George R. Stewart, who wrote, in 1968, a centennial history of his department, reviewed

Bradley's notebooks and found that he had recorded the name of every essay, together with a line of commentary and a grade; Stewart estimates that in the period from 1882 to 1890 Bradley made 8000 such entries. "The compulsiveness," Stewart observes, "is appalling. For instance. . . under the name of W.L.Jepson. . . Bradley wrote, The Benefits I expect to Derive from a College Course, without an abbreviation or the slighting of a capital letter. He then added his comment, in red ink, "Characterized by an inexactness of expression and a short, 'chippy' sentence structure." The theme received a grade of 3--roughly, a C."[16]

This is little enough evidence, but taken together with Bradley's diaries and anecdotes shared by his colleagues, it seems that the man who directed composition at California responded to students in a precise and impersonal style, and he saw his task as the identification and correction of weaknesses. He does not, however, seem to have looked exclusively for sentence-level errors, and he did not take any pleasure or pride in being a ruthless critic as Harvard's A.S. Hill is said to have done.[17]

Bradley's course was not popular. At the end of every year, in a ritual that rivalled the rush for its exuberant high spirits, freshmen burned or buried their algebra and composition textbooks--Bourdon and Minto. A newspaper account in April of 1898 reports:

> The Berkeley campus tonight will be the scene of the funeral ceremony of Bourdon and Minto, the traditional thorns in the sides of freshman collegians. The class of '01, popularly known as "naughty ones," will wreak its vengeance for the hard hours spent over the pages of these works by cremating them upon a high pyre, amid the most spectacular and striking ceremonies.[18]

When Bradley began his work at California, his supervisor and the sole professor of English was the philolog . Albert S. Cook. In 1889, Cook took a position at Yale, to be replaced by a young man from Michigan named Charles Mills Gayley.

Gayley was a charismatic figure--an excellent speaker, a writer of poetry and songs (he wrote both "The Yellow and Blue" for Michigan and "The Blue and Gold" for

California), a man who was passionate in his intellectual interests and warm in a remarkably wide circle of friendships. He had taught Latin and English at Michigan (where he was said to have "saved" freshman English) and won this parting tribute from the University of Michigan *Chronicle*:

> Professor Gayley is not only a poet, a thinker, an educator of remarkably broad culture and original methods, and a man of affairs; but he is, also, from the students' point of view, a thorough "good fellow." Generous, warmhearted, and sympathetic, surcharged with life and spirits. . . he has by his influence and example, exerted a strong and lasting impulse toward manliness and the virtues of a healthy and vigorous Christianity upon all with whom he has come in contact.[19]

Gayley came to be equally well appreciated at Berkeley, where he was warmly welcomed by the faculty--consisting, at that time, of 37 men--and immediately popular among students.

Gayley knew Fred Newton Scott at Michigan; while he was teaching Latin, Scott was doing his graduate work. Scott wrote some school songs that were published with "The Yellow and the Blue" and in later years the two men collaborated on two books of aesthetic theory. In 1902, Gayley invited Scott to teach a summer session at Berkeley; Scott offered a course on the Analysis of English Prose and another on Methods of Teaching Rhetoric and English Composition.

The men shared an expansive view of rhetoric and the conviction that the study of language ought to embrace a wide range of texts. In Gayley's English Department, courses in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton coexisted peacefully with those in "Oration and Argument" or "Exercises in the Art of Discourse." Gayley also initiated the Carnot debates, a series of hotly contested debates against Stanford, and he coached an intercollegiate debating club, among the most selective and prestigious groups on campus. Thus--in spite of a required freshman course that continued to be quite narrow in its aims

and rigid in its approach--students at the University of California had the opportunity to study rhetoric and poetics in an integrated curriculum and an active extracurriculum.

These opportunities were not equally available, however, to men and women. It was true in 1900, as it is today, that fields dominated by women were devalued, and liberal arts courses (the courses viewed as most useful to prospective teachers) were popular among women. Gayley was displeased by the number of women studying English and made a deliberate effort to defeminize his field. During Gayley's tenure, no woman was selected for the intercollegiate debating team; women interested in debate created a club of their own, which they operated without faculty support.[20]

Even in courses offered by the department, Gayley discouraged women and encouraged enrollment by men. One student told Gayley's biographer about having been summoned, together with seven other men, for a new course on Argumentation from Literary Forms. In the course, the students took great masterpieces of literature and out of them drew themes and propositions for debate. The student suspected that the course was a device to seduce debaters into the study of literary works. He noted that Gayley "excluded women, by setting up certain pre-requisites to which he adhered with the women, but neglected with the men."[21]

A few years later, Gayley designed a course in Great Books especially for students in the College of Engineering. He had taught Great Books courses for the University Extension and for the College of Letters to great acclaim, filling auditoriums in San Francisco and even Berkeley's Greek Theater; he sought to introduce this popular class to the University men least likely to encounter great literature during their regular course of study. When the course met for the first time, however, the room was overcrowded, and many young men gave up their seats to the women present. The *Daily Californian* reports on Gayley's reaction:

> . . . Professor Gayley, with all the Chesterfieldian grace he could summon for the occasion, asked the young ladies to surrender their seats so that those for whom the

course had been specially designed might enjoy it under the most auspicious circumstances. The request was rather startling, but was complied with in apparent good grace. Roll call hereafter will probably show a large number of women students absent.[22]

The article was published under the headline "No Coeds Need Apply: Professor Gayley Saves His Class for Men Students by Heroic Measures."

When word of this episode got off campus, it raised a protest from parents and alumnae. Gayley insisted that the presence of women was damaging to the course: the engineering students were unwilling to come to class among women, he said, because they had no chance to wash first, and besides, he could not be as severe as he wished with the men in the presence of ladies.[23] In subsequent years, Great Books was offered in one semester for men and in the other for women.

If we stand back to consider the implications of this incident, and of the general development of curricular and extracurricular instruction in English under Gayley's lead, we are led to the conclusion that those observing coeducation so often face: men and women may enroll in the same university, may take the same course of study and earn the same degree, but they do not necessarily get the same education. At the University of California at the turn of the century, women contended with a violent and hierarchical student culture, a faculty skeptical of their abilities and unconvinced of their right to be there, and an administration indifferent to their concerns.

A history of rhetoric instruction at Berkeley can point to many accomplishments--an impressive array of courses supplemented by a wide range of extracurricular opportunities for writing and debate--but these opportunities were not equally available to men and women. The experience of the men is what you find recorded in newspapers, yearbooks, and annual reports from the president. The experience of the women is slowly coming into view.

Notes

[1] Mabel **Newcomer**, *A Century of Higher Education for Women* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1959); Barbara Miller **Solomon**, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985).

[2] Albert **Kitzhaber**, *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1990); Robert **Connors**, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," *College Composition and Communication* 32 (December 1981), 444-455; James **Berlin**, "Writing Instruction in School and College English, 1890-1985" in *A Short History of Writing Instruction*, ed. James J. Murphy (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1990).

[3] JoAnn **Campbell**, "Controlling Voices: The Legacy of English A at Radcliffe College 1883-1917," *College Composition and Communication* 43 (December, 1992), 472-485; Karyn **Hollis**, "Liberating Voices: Autobiographical Writing at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, 1921-1938," *College Composition and Communication* 45 (February 1994), 31-60; Susan **Kates**, "Dramatic Sites: Rhetoric and the Marginalized Student, 1900-35," Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July, 1994.

[4] Newcomer, 46.

[5] **University of California**, *Circular of the College of Letters and the Colleges of Science, 1889.*

[6] University of California, 1889 Circular.

[7] University of California, 1889 Circular.

[8] Class rivalries are discussed in Verne **Stadtman**, ed., *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967) and in Joy **Lichtenstein**'s novel *For the Blue and Gold: A Tale of Life at the University of California* (San Francisco: A. M. Robertson, 1901).

[9] Lichtenstein, 43.

[10] Lynn **Gordon**, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 53-55.

[11] Lichtenstein, 222-223.

[12] *The Prytaneans: An Oral History of the Prytanean Society, Its Members and Their University* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1933); Gordon, 55-70.

[13] Kitzhaber, 60-73; Donald **Stewart**, "Two Model Teachers and the Harvardization of English Departments," in James J. Murphy, ed., *The Rhetorical Tradition and Modern Writing* (New York: MLA, 1982).

[14] Campbell, 474, 475.

[15] Lichtenstein, 30.

[16] George R. **Stewart**, *The Department of English of the University of California on the Berkeley Campus* (Regents of the University of California, 1968), 17.

[17] Kitzhaber, 61.

[18] Newspaper account dated April 25, 1898. The clipping appears in the scrapbook of Blanche Juliette Southack, University of California Archives, Bancroft Library; the newspaper cannot be identified.

[19] Benjamin **Kurtz**, notes for biography of Charles Mills Gayley (CMG papers, University of California Archives, The Bancroft Library).

[20] The women's debating club, the Philomathean Society, was organized in November of 1898.

[21] Kurtz, notes.

[22] *Daily Californian*, January 19, 1903.

[23] Kurtz, notes.